

# Common Sense Goes a Long Way

By ABH3 Ashley Cypret

Some people refer to operational risk management as a formal approach to common sense. Whether that statement is true is debatable, but I wish I had used either to avoid an incident on the ship.

The day started out easy for the flight-deck crew on USS *Iwo Jima* (LHD-7), just a few maintenance and training flights for the embarked Marine Air Combat Element. It was mid-afternoon when we worked to get the flight deck ready for a RAS and VERTREP scheduled for the next day.

The deck was set up for the VERTREP when the CO announced on the 1MC that we had been ordered to leave for the coast of Lebanon to evacuate American-embassy personnel and citizens. Within a few hours, we were told to respot the flight deck for an early morning launch.

On the starboard elevator, AV-8B Harrier maintainers requested a MEPP (mobile electric power plant) unit for an instrument power-check before takeoff. Our tractor king (TK) directed me to get the MEPP unit to the aircraft for some on-the-job training because I was being considered for the TK job. Even before I got on the MEPP, I reemphasized to him that I was not qualified for the MEPP unit and that I needed a phase sheet for it. The actual or acting TK told me not to worry; he said a little training would help me get a better feel for the MEPP unit. Oh man was he ever wrong!

I was relieved to learn that the MEPP unit already was located next



Driving MEPPs or towing aircraft on, off or around elevators can be tricky.



Navy photo by PH3 Angel Roman-Otero


to the Harrier, and all we had to do was to hook up the power cord. The maintainers immediately did their testing, and the jet was up and ready for the morning launch. We disconnected the power cord from the Harrier, and I got on the MEPP unit to drive it off the elevator. Unfortunately, the only way to get off of the elevator was to drive along the painted red-and-yellow-square visual-landing-aid markings around the elevator deck edge, adjacent to the coaming. A hump exists between the elevator and the flight deck, where the elevator locks fit into the flight deck, and the TK advised me to drive over the hump.

I was a little tentative and hesitated for a few seconds before moving forward. My two front tires went over the obstacle without a problem, but my back tires got stuck. I felt pressure to get the MEPP unit clear of the elevator, so I had to give it a little more gas. Because everything happened so fast after I accelerated, I'm still not sure exactly what happened. The unit jumped forward with an almost sling-shot effect, and all I could see was the tail section of the Harrier approaching rapidly. I turned the steering wheel, hoping I would miss the tail of the jet and not hit the Harrier's stabilator. I just as quickly decided my only option was to slam on the brakes and hope for the best. Fortunately, I was able to avoid a head-on collision but still scraped the stabilator. My right arm was dragged between the MEPP unit and the stabilator, requiring a trip to medical for a checkup and to make sure no carbon fibers were in my arm.

The Harrier suffered minor damage that took a couple hours to fix, and the maintainers did a quick patch job, avoiding a missed mission.

Afterward, the TK and I went into flight-deck control to tell the handler and chief exactly what happened. We were told to write a statement and to document everything that had taken place. We then were sent to GSE to talk with the AIMD officer and LCPO. They immediately advised us that our licenses would be suspended until a full investigation could be done. It took about a month before it was completed, and we were cleared to operate again.

I learned a lot that day; the most important lesson was: Common sense goes a long way. I should have done an ORM review and asked myself these basic questions. Am I qualified? Do I have a license to be on this gear? Have I taken the proper classes for this gear? Since the answer to these questions was no, I should have used common sense and not have gotten behind the wheel.

Operational risk management will help prevent mishaps, and when we're talking about multi-million dollar aircraft...no room for error exists. 

*Petty Officer Cypret works in the V-1 division aboard USS Iwo Jima (LHD-7).*

*The problem here is that she did identify her lack of license and qual, but the TK convinced her to do it anyway. She should have been more assertive.—RADM George Mayer*